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STUDY OF THE CLASSICS.

THAT we owe much to the Greek and Roman writers is now, we believe, generally admitted in every country but ours. For two thousand years, the literary world have acknowledged them as their masters, and none have proclaimed the benefits of their directions and their example more gratefully, than the very English authors, whom we have lately heard extolled at their expense. It is not our intention to dwell on the merits, by which the ancients have gained their present celebrity. Few if any of those who have thoroughly studied their works, have denied its justness, and those who have not, will, we hope, think it a sufficient inducement to examine candidly for themselves. Men are certainly bound to respect an opinion supported by such an enlightened multitude, and tested by such a lapse of time, till it is contradicted by fair and competent judges. We do not deny that classical literature has been extolled in too high and unqualified a manner, that its real benefits have been mistaken, that it has been represented as the only source of advantages which belong to it in common with other branches of knowledge, and recommended by many of its votaries, not always the most enlightened, for imaginary merits; nor do we consider it, as it is sometimes thought in England, the first, second, and third subject of attention, the sum and substance of all useful knowledge, the only basis of a wide and lasting celebrity.

It is indeed a bright, but by no means the only ornament of a cultivated mind. The Latin and Greek classics are best studied in conjunction with the finest English writers, and not to the exclusion of them. Though much more is learned of a foreign language by writing, than by reading it, and to a certain extent poetry is better for this purpose than prose, yet we do not deny that the practice of composing Latin verses may have been sometimes carried so far as to sacrifice the end to the means. Neither do we think that the warmest rational admirers of the ancients can well justify the practice, now prevailing, of frequently introducing passages from their works, in addresses to popular assemblies. There is no very evident reason why a line from a classical author should be treated with the veneration formerly paid to a sybilline verse, why a speech, perhaps on the most familiar subject, should be interspersed with trite and pompous extracts

in an unknown tongue. It would be absurd to say, that on such occasions, Latin and Greek quotations are always inadmissible ; but as the happiest of them can gratify only a small part of a respectable audience, at the expense of all the rest, we think those only should be allowed, which are absolutely indispensable, peculiarly appropriate, or strikingly novel and beautiful. We have said the more on this subject, because we think that the friends of classical literature are bound to oppose every symptom of the affectation and pedantry, which have tended in so high a degree to render it unpopular.

It is for far other reasons that we plead for the introduction of these studies among us. It is to correct the bad taste, which, more than any thing else, has checked the growth of American literature. It is that we may have good authors in English, and great readers of Greek and Latin ; we wish that those who compose may compose better, and that those who are too indolent to write may be more able to judge. The ancients are certainly of little practical use, if we read them merely to treasure up their striking expressions. We should strive to catch their spirit, and imitate their mode of thinking, and peruse the works of great authors, as we contemplate the lives of good men, that we may learn to be governed by the same general principles. We value classical literature, because we think it sheds a light on our own, and not because we imagine that it possesses, like the vestal flames of the ancients, a mysterious influence on the welfare of the country where it is cherished. There are some, however, who admit to a high extent the excellence of the Greek and Roman authors, but deny the expediency of studying them in the original. All those which are worth reading, say they, are ably and faithfully translated, and why go any farther. This opinion is generally confined to men, who have read the ancients, if at all, only to a small extent, or at a late period of life, but has been embraced in this country, perhaps hastily, by several individuals of sense and candour. We grant for a moment, that the classics have been thus generally and faithfully interpreted, and we consider many of these versions as valuable accessions to English literature. There are so many men, whose course of life prevents them from acquiring a thorough knowledge of the originals, to say nothing of almost the whole of the other sex, that few authors deserve the thanks of society better than able and judicious transla-

tors. So rich is the literature of the ancients, that much which is valuable is preserved in any tolerable interpretation; but it cannot be denied that much is wanting in the most accurate. The nice touches, which more than any thing else indicate the hand of a master, are precisely those which it is most difficult to copy, or to imitate. Besides is it nothing that we lose their own style, that we converse with the sages of antiquity through an interpreter, instead of listening to the simple, precise, and harmonious expressions, which they themselves have chosen? Do we not necessarily seek their instructions with less ardour, hear them with less interest, and remember them less tenaciously? Those, too, who consider the intimate connexion between thought and language, who are sensible that the charms of the idea are often so delicately blended with those of the expression, that it is impossible to discriminate between them, must allow, that by stripping a work of its original language, we divest it of much more than mere verbal beauties. How particularly must this be the case in translating poetry. So different is the structure of Greek or Latin verse from that of English, that the utmost which can be done by the ablest translator is, not to preserve all the beauties of the original, but to compensate as far as may be for the loss of many of them, by others of his own. The most popular poetical translations are proverbially inaccurate, and who that has studied, however slightly, the *Iliad* or *Æneid*, does not know, that in reading them in English, it is not so much Homer and Virgil that we admire, as Pope and Dryden. Cowper determined to be faithful, and with all his genius is often prosaic, and it is owing only to his original works, that his versions are, we will not say read, but published. How little should we think of an opinion formed of Milton by a foreigner who had read him only in De Lille, and yet how few authors are there like Pope or Cowper, or even like De Lille, who are willing to undertake a task so laborious, and yet, as it is generally considered, so inglorious as that of a good copier. Such men are inclined to believe, that fidelity to their authors will contribute far less to their own celebrity than splendid deviations, and that exactness is a merit of a lower order, and of course are continually tempted to lose the translator in the poet.

There are other advantages, besides the intrinsic merit of the ancient classics, amply sufficient to repay us for devoting

a few years to the study of Greek and Latin. We have said something in a former number,* on the benefits of this pursuit, as a discipline of the mind. Indeed, we know no kind of labour, so well adapted to the general improvement of the faculties in early youth. Mathematics and metaphysics, and those only, are equally effectual in forming habits of accurate and constant attention, and those are better fitted to the force and the taste of mature minds. Besides, in studying those the fancy is completely chained down, instead of being at once strengthened and chastened, as it must be in the perusal, of even the most embarrassing of the ancient authors. This advantage is surely by no means inconsiderable, and ought of itself to exempt the classics from the reproach of being utterly useless. But it might be asked, why our faculties may not be equally improved by acquiring the finest modern languages. To this we should answer, as on a former occasion, that there is time enough for both, and the more so, because, in learning the ancient, we make imperceptibly, a considerable progress in the modern. Besides the mental discipline to which scholars are necessarily subjected, in studying the meaning of Greek and Latin authors, they may derive another, and perhaps a greater benefit, from the practice of construing them.

If in this exercise they are properly directed and assisted by their instructors, there is scarce any, through which they can so soon arrive at a command of their own language, through which they can be so well and so quickly taught, to suit the expression to the idea, and not the idea to the expression, and to speak and write on all occasions, however sudden, elegantly, yet definitely. This part of education, important as it is, was, till within a short time, scarcely regarded in this country. Little else has generally been required than that the author should be done into English, no matter how clumsily, and the extempore translations of pupils have seldom displayed any thing more, than, to use an expression of Horace, the disjointed members of the original. Some of our instructors have now adopted the custom, of exacting a neater and more connected method of construing, and we believe that none, who have observed its effects, will think that we have overrated its advantages. This is a source of improvement, which can be enjoyed in a high de-

* Review of Wells' *Tacitus*.

gree, only by the students of dead languages. The living are generally taught, for many incontrovertible reasons, by natives of the countries, where they are spoken, who, however great their abilities and assiduity, can seldom know enough of our own tongue, to assist their pupils in translating exactly and elegantly. A boy may acquire in the same period even more of a modern than of an ancient language, but he will improve himself far less in English.

Much as has been said of the importance of learning Latin and Greek, because they are the sources of so large a part of our own vocabulary, we think that their consequence in this respect is in general greatly underrated. Without some knowledge of etymology, it is next to impossible to distinguish the nice shades of meaning, on which depend so many of the most delicate beauties of eloquence. He who wants propriety of expression, can never be elegant, and he who possesses this in a high degree, will need little if any thing else. It has not, however, been the custom of the enemies of classical literature to examine its alleged advantages, even for the purpose of disproving their existence. They have generally preferred dwelling on some loose objections, founded on its supposed tendency to contract or incumber native genius. To this and to no other cause do they attribute the pedantry, prolixity and stiffness of the writers of the sixteenth century. That these faults exist cannot be denied, but if such are the works of the authors of that age who studied the classics, what are the works of those who did not? It is not the question, whether Taylor and Barrow wrote better than Addison and Goldsmith, but whether they wrote better than their contemporaries, and whether their faults are not owing to the century in which they lived, rather than to the studies which they pursued. Milton's works are indeed incumbered with classical learning, but they owe to it many of their ornaments, and we think that his beautiful allusions more than repay us for his excessive display of erudition. No arguments, however, are oftener brought forward to prove that ancient literature is injurious as well as useless, than those drawn from the examples of Shakspeare and Franklin. Now if we would make Shakspeare's greatness the foundation of a general rule, we should say, not that youth should never receive a classical education, but that they should receive no systematic education at all. This would certainly be an easy

experiment ; but after the fair trial, which has been given it in at least some parts of this country, we may venture to doubt its general success. We fear that most of our youthful followers of Shakspeare have contented themselves with imitating his early excursions in other fields than those of fancy. Besides the supposition that Shakspeare, if better taught, would have written worse, is entirely gratuitous. He has been great not by infringing the rules, but by surpassing the models of antiquity. It is not his confusion of time and place, his mixture of tragedy and comedy, which delight us, it is his sublime moral sentiments, his strokes of nature, his command of every avenue to the human heart, his possession, in short, of those excellencies, from which all rules of good writing are drawn, and the passages which readers most admire are those which critics would least condemn. A thorough knowledge of the classics could never have encumbered or perverted his genius, but it would have brought a new world under the dominion of his fancy, it might have refined his taste, and prevented those faults which, by a sort of fatality, generally follow closely in the rear of his beauties.

The success of Franklin, like that of Shakspeare, would prove too much, and should prevent us from studying not only the ancient, but the modern languages ; for if he was unacquainted with the former, he knew also, at least till an advanced period of life, but little of the latter.

Those too who would elevate him at the expense of the great progenitors of literature, should consider that he selected, as a pattern, the style of the very author, who, of all others, most obeyed the rules and imitated the models of antiquity, the classic Addison. Surely Franklin could not have been seriously injured, by consulting the leaders, instead of the follower. But what force can we allow to a few examples of those, who have succeeded without the aid of classical knowledge, when we find them opposed by the opinions or practice of such a vast majority of men of genius in every country of Europe, when we consider, that the general principles of the rhetoric of Greece and Rome, like those of their architecture, have been adopted by universal consent in every enlightened country, and though variously modified, have been rarely, if ever, successfully contravened.

Classical studies are, however, often represented in this

country as the luxuries of older communities. We want practical, it is said, and not learned men. Why should we rouse the ancients from the sleep of two thousand years, to instruct us how to live under political and religious institutions, so essentially different from theirs? What have Greece and Rome to do with the nineteenth century, and the western world? To this we answer, that if education be confined to the arts necessary to procure us the physical comforts of life, it must be narrow indeed. But this kind of reasoning has, we believe, no higher sanction, than the authority of the Dutch professor in the Vicar of Wakefield. ‘You see me, young man, I never learned Greek, and I don’t find that I ever missed it. I have had a doctor’s cap and gown without Greek; I have ten thousand florins a year without Greek, and I eat heartily without Greek. In short, I don’t know Greek, and I do not believe there is any use in it.’ With how great force might such arguments be applied to the whole circle of sciences, and in which of them could our youth, in general, be profitably instructed? How plausibly might Galileo or Newton have been addressed in a style similar to that, in which the classics have been lately attacked in our newspapers. What have you to do, one of these practical men could have said, with worlds millions of miles from ours? The earth is your sphere of action, you will find more than enough there, to engage and reward your attention. How little has society gained from studious astronomers. It is to men comparatively unlettered that we owe the invention of the compass, and the discovery of the western continent.

Whatever we may think of reasons like these or of the worth of classical studies, yet if we determine to make them an important part of education, we must of course inquire how much time can be spared from our indispensable avocations. Our laws are as unpropitious to the transmission of great estates, as our situation is to the acquisition of them, and few are exempted from the necessity of entering early into active business, to provide for their own subsistence. The superintendence of our instructors generally ceases with the first twenty years of our life, and the farther culture of our minds is left to our own judgment and industry. It would be idle to recommend any plan, which, in a vast majority of cases, would be controlled and

broken by particular circumstances, and yet it is manifest that a very extensive knowledge of the classics could hardly be gained in the time which their most zealous votaries could give to them, within that period. This, however, would not be necessary. We should wish not to force the student to labour through the ancients, on the faith of general opinion, but to put him in a situation to judge of their value for himself. This can only be done by smoothing those obstacles before him in his childhood, which are best conquered then, and most embarrassing at a later period. If he sits down to read the dead languages at a maturer age, perplexed with the little niceties of idioms, of syntax, and of quantity, what can be expected, but that he will give up a task so irksome, long before he can realise the reward of his labour, and that judging very naturally, from a short and painful experience, he will think that the celebrity of the classics is founded only on their difficulty.

Be their merits what they may, their general reputation should certainly entitle them to a fairer trial than this. Were our countrymen enabled to judge impartially, by a proper education, there would be little difference in their decisions, or if any should conclude that the object was worthless, they could not but feel that the pursuit had been salutary. If we are told that by this system of instruction, we may inspire students with early prejudices on a question which we profess to leave open to subsequent inquiry, we answer that of all opinions, those founded in ignorance best deserve, from their very nature, the name of prejudices, that if we are disposed to overrate what we have gained by our own exertions, we are still more ready to undervalue what we are too indolent to pursue, that we can learn the value of any species of science or literature (if we refuse to trust to its established reputation) only by examining its merits, and that we can never do this, without the hazard of imbibing at the same time prepossessions in its favour. If the student knows the classics, particularly if he has become acquainted with them by his own investigation, this it would seem forms a very conclusive argument against any testimony which he can give to their advantage.

Between the ages of ten and twenty-one we believe that the experiment could be made fully and fairly. We do not ask that additional years should be devoted to the dead languages, but

that those already assigned to the study of them in most of our large cities, should be laid out to a little better purpose. From our almost entire want of actual examples, it may be difficult to conceive the progress which might be made in the classics in that period, without neglecting any other essential part of education. When we consider that in the time just mentioned, the course of education in England, elaborate as it is, is often finished; that in ten years we read about the same number of volumes in the dead languages, that students of common abilities have often a large portion of their hours, both at school and college, at their own disposal, we may be justified in believing, that our present striking inferiority in this species of knowledge must result from a want either of assiduity or of method. Some improvements have already been made in our classical schools, and with such zeal and rapidity as to support the public in hoping and expecting many more; and unless our colleges (which we presume is the case) are now undergoing very material changes, they must soon sink far below their present relative elevation.

The trifling advances which our youth generally make in the dead languages is by no means the strongest objection to the systems of instruction prevailing among us at present. Our acquisitions are as unsatisfactory as they are limited, and at the close of our college life we escape gladly from ancient literature, as from a thorny labyrinth, in which we have been compelled to wander without profit or pleasure by the tyranny of custom. By pursuing a different course we should be enabled to enter the world with much higher classical attainments, and what is far better, with a much stronger disposition to preserve what is already gained, and acquire what is yet wanting by solitary industry. Much must be left after all to ourselves, for in mentioning the short period which might be given up to public education, we have considered rather what is practicable, than what could be desired.

We need not fear but that the classics, if pursued with tolerable assiduity, under judicious instructors, will recommend themselves sufficiently to the student to engage much of his leisure during the remainder of his life. They will always afford him, if nothing more, an elegant amusement, for this is evident from the unaffected enthusiasm, with which they have so often inspired their assiduous votaries. It is in this

country particularly, where we have so few either of the injurious or innocent luxuries of older communities, where the most unexceptionable of all, the fine arts, are considered by many too expensive to be cherished as they deserve, without the aid of government, that we should value a source of recreation, so pure, so copious, and so accessible. We have said nothing of Latin as the original language of the civil law, nor of Greek as that of the New Testament. Both theologians and lawyers are too sensible of the importance of a minute accuracy on legal and religious subjects, to trust completely to the fidelity of any translation. It would be equally unnecessary to combat the objections sometimes adduced against classical literature on account of the pagan mythology. To us they appear about as well founded as the opposition of Rousseau to the perusal of fables by children, because truth is violated by representing brutes as speaking and thinking. We think the false mythology of the classics more than outweighed by their enlightened ethics, and it is not the least of their claims to our respect that they diffused the light of morality over the most cultivated nations on earth for ages preceding the dawn of Christianity, and have since lent no inconsiderable aid to her influence.

‘ ————— These soft fires
Not only enlighten, but with kindly heat
Of various influence, foment and warm,
Temper and nourish, or in part shed down
Their stellar virtue on all kinds that grow
On earth, made hereby apter to receive
Perfection from the sun’s more potent ray.’

Had we been content to rest the question, which we have endeavoured to elucidate, on authority instead of argument, we should have saved much labour to ourselves and our readers. What was the opinion of the first settlers of New England, those ancestors whom we extol so loudly and justly? Did they look on classical literature as injurious, as useless, or even as merely ornamental? Did they consider it as a luxury of a doubtful tendency, to be introduced, if at all, only in opulent communities? Was it not one of the earliest and most favoured objects of their solicitude, and that too while they were continually struggling with the most doubtful prospects for their very existence? Yet these were not prejudiced theorists, not mere book-worms, not men who re-

tired from the duties of society to indulge themselves in heaping up a mass of knowledge, which should remain concealed in their own bosoms till it descended with them to the tomb. They were men who read, that they might the better think and act, who considered acquired information rather as the source of wisdom than as wisdom itself, and as most valuable for the original reflections which it awakens ; who felt that we should study the works of others, to render our own minds the fountains, rather than the channels of instruction. They saw the connexion between one kind of useful knowledge and another, the influence of what we read on what we write, and say, and do ; of contemplation on practice. It was for the purpose of securing as well as ornamenting their civil and religious institutions, that they raised at an early period those classical seminaries which we have done comparatively so little to enlarge. Scarce a generation has since passed away without leaving a living testimony to the correctness of their views in the characters of many of its most distinguished citizens. Were we as liberal in proportion to our means as our forefathers, the advantages of classical learning would be no longer a subject of discussion, for they would be too evident to be denied for a moment, if our youth could be enabled to pursue them with better success, by the improved condition of our schools and colleges. To render these what they should be, nothing is required but encouragement ; and it would be an easy matter to remedy all defects in the machinery, if a proper force and direction could be given to the current of public opinion, which must set the whole in motion.

APPROPRIATIONS FOR THE SUPPORT OF LITERATURE IN THE STATE OF NEW YORK.

WE avail ourselves with pleasure of the opportunity of correcting an error, and supplying a deficiency in an article of our January number, which is furnished by a statement in the Albany Argus of July 20. In speaking of the degree, to which our state legislatures had patronized the literary cause and establishments, we observed, ‘that New York had liberally endowed Hamilton College,’ leaving it to be inferred, that the literary bounty of our most powerful state had stopped